

The Lincoln-Douglas Debate at Alton

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The institution of slavery has been a subject of controversy since its inception. While some believed it to be a guiltless method of free labor, others found it morally wrong. This difference of opinions became more apparent in the United States during the mid-nineteenth century. The disagreement became so heated that it became a cause leading to the Civil War in the 1860s. Before the war, however, the dispute over slavery had reached the political level during the Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858 in Illinois. This series of debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas was one of the major events leading up to the Civil War. Each debate brought out ideas that helped shape future political views. The final debate in Alton solidified Douglas' opinion of states' rights and Lincoln's abolitionist view on slavery.

Democrat Stephen A. Douglas was steadfast in his stand for popular sovereignty. Although he did not believe slavery was right, he did believe that each state or territory should have the right to choose whether or not to allow slavery. He explained that laws and policies that fit Illinois and Vermont do not fit South Carolina or California. In his opening speech at Alton, he stated "For this reason this Union was established on the right of each State to do as it pleased on the question of slavery, and every other question; and the various States were not allowed to complain of, much less interfere with, the policy of their neighbors." Douglas' view of the Constitution gave each state the right to make their own laws instead of being the subject of national laws. His argument for the people's choice was underscored by his rejection of the Lecompton Constitution, a

constitution proposed for the people of the Kansas territory. This document was made by proslavery delegates without using the vote of the Kansas majority, who overwhelmingly wanted to be a free state. Douglas stated that he opposed the document not because of the slavery section in it, but because it “was not the act and deed of the people of Kansas, and did not embody their will.” Therefore, he was not absolutely proslavery, but fought for the majority’s view. When he brought up the Declaration of Independence, Douglas expressed his belief that blacks were not included in its statement that all men are created equal. He argued that the writers did not mean the minority races when writing the document, only those of European descent. He also explained to the Alton citizens “this government was established on the white basis. It was established by white men for the benefit of white men and their posterity forever, and should be administered by white men, and none others.” Thus, even if a state voted to be free, Douglas thought that blacks did not have equal rights. Blacks did not have the right to be automatically free, either. Douglas was vague on his own opinion on slavery, but to the extent of states’ rights, he was very clear that he believed in the people’s choice.

In contrast to Douglas, Lincoln expressed an abolitionist view on slavery at the Alton debate, seeing it as morally wrong. Unlike Douglas’ view of popular sovereignty, Lincoln wanted to put an end to slavery in all states. In his reply to Douglas at the Alton debate, he shared his belief that Douglas was starting “a conspiracy to make the institution of slavery national.” Instead of fighting for what the people wanted, Lincoln accused Douglas of trying to make slavery legal across the nation. He backed his argument with the fact that Douglas supported the Dred Scott decision, which meant slaves could not gain freedom at the time and Congress could not ban slavery in

territories. Lincoln also rebutted Douglas' argument about the Declaration of Independence he made earlier during the Alton debate. The writers of the Declaration, he reasoned, really did mean that all men were created equal, but not in all cases, such as women, children, and the mentally ill. The phrase 'all men are created equal' is "true as an abstract principle in the organization of society as well in organized society, and it should be kept in view as a fundamental principle." Critics of Lincoln said that his opinion on slavery was shaky; however, the more he talked, the more strongly he felt against the institution. As a result, the arguments he made in the Alton debate grew into the political views he held during his presidency.

The location of the last debate was significant and had meaning behind it. In 1837, an abolitionist in Alton named Elijah Lovejoy was murdered by proslavery rioters while defending his anti-slavery printing press. Lovejoy died for using freedom of speech, and now two prominent politicians were using that freedom in his hometown, twenty-one years later. Additionally, Lovejoy was killed for wanting to end slavery, which was the main topic of the debate. Being acquainted with Lovejoy in the past, Lincoln was influenced by his views on slavery and recognized the gravity of the issue. Although Lincoln lost the election that followed the Alton debate, the ideas that came out of it became stronger and helped him win the presidential election two years later. These debates also made Lincoln much more popular and started to change the public's view on slavery.

The Lincoln-Douglas Debate in Alton was a very important one because it was the last impression the politicians made upon the electorate. Instead of issues such as immigration, land grants, unemployment, and tariffs, Lincoln and Douglas focused on

their differing opinions on slavery. Although they made their views clearly distinct, they only underlined their differences and never made a compromise or solution. The debate did not improve the settlement of the disagreement, if not made it worse. With Douglas' states' rights and Lincoln's abolitionist view, the matter could not be more friction filled. The debate did allow Lincoln to become more confident about his views; however, and they shaped his ideas and political position on slavery by the time he ran for president. It also placed him more in the spotlight, giving him the publicity he needed for the later election. The Alton debate became a precursor of the future presidential campaigns of 1860, and an indirect cause of the Civil War. It was one of the factors that made the United States into the antislavery nation it is today. [From Richard A. Heckman, *Lincoln Vs. Douglas*. Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs P, 1967; "Lecompton." *Answers.Com*. <<http://www.answers.com/topic/lecompton-constitution>> (Sept. 9, 2007); Abraham Lincoln, "Last Joint Debate, At Alton. Senator Douglas's Speech. Lincoln, Abraham. 1897. Political Debates Between Lincoln and Douglas." *Bartleby.Com*. May 2001. <<http://www.bartleby.com/251/71.html>> (Sept. 9, 2007); "Mr. Lincoln and Freedom: the Progress of Abraham Lincoln's Opposition of Slavery." *Mr. Lincoln and Freedom*. 2002. Lincoln Institute. <<http://www.mrlincolnanandfreedom.org/inside.asp?ID=77&subjectID=2>> (Sept. 6, 2007); and John Splaine, *A Companion to the Lincoln Douglas Debates*.]